

Foreign Language Curriculum Organization

By John R. Aydelott

In designing foreign language (FL) curricula an important but often overlooked concern is effective organization. Many FL programs give careful thought to linguistic content and sequencing, and instructional materials and activities, but they neglect those factors that relate to the structure and processes for implementing the curriculum. Matters as basic as physical space, classroom temperature, number of students, or time of day can also make a major difference in the way a teacher conducts a class and in the way the learners receive instruction. These are some of the concerns relating to the organizational dimension in FL curriculum planning.

The Organizational Dimension

Bellon and Handler (1982) identify three areas of curriculum organization:

- resources: time; people; instructional materials; facilities, and equipment.
- organizational process: the interactional network of the resources serving the curriculum.
- program units within the organization: all the other extra-curricular programs within the institution to support the goals of the curriculum.

The "fit" of these three organizational concerns with the goals and objectives of the curriculum is crucial to its successful implementation.

Resources: A curriculum cannot operate without resources. The amount and kind of resources available are important, but especially important is the way they are allocated and used. Take time, for example. An intensive FL curriculum may allocate more time for beginning learners and less time for advanced learners. A daily schedule might have beginning learners in class for six hours while the intermediate learners may attend for four hours and the advanced for only two. If the class schedule has been set based on curriculum goals, time will be allocated effectively. But if the decisions for scheduling have been based on the availability of teachers or classroom space or on some other factor unrelated to the goals and objectives of the curriculum, then the schedule may not be supportive of learning.

In many FL programs, the assignment of teachers to classes is one of the most challenging considerations in resource allocation. Many teachers who have been with a program for several years expect the privileges of seniority. These privileges can lead to their teaching the more desirable classes while new teachers are given the left-over classes. If teacher assignments are made based on seniority and not learners' needs, then the curriculum may be weakened by low morale and feelings of alienation among teachers and students.

The use of facilities, like the scheduling of instruction or the assignment of classes, is also an example of resource allocation. Often the assignment of classroom space is based on seniority, personal influence, or favoritism rather than need. Consider senior teachers who request and are assigned specific classrooms that are bothered by less outside noise, have better acoustics, better chairs, better lighting or closer proximity to the teachers' offices.

Other examples that might influence the success of a curriculum include the selection of instructional materials, and the availability and use of out-of-class resources and other support services. Money is also a major resource to adequately compensate the teachers and administrators for their time and effort.

Organizational Processes: Organizational processes refer to the way that resources interact together to support the curriculum. Three basic processes can be identified: communication, monitoring, and decision making.

1. The communication process includes the mode of communication and its flow within a program. Optional means of communication may entail posting messages on bulletin boards, distributing individual copies of messages through an internal (possibly electronic) mail system, and sharing information orally during meetings or between class breaks. The different modes of communication-oral and written-are usually present to some degree in every program, but the size of the program usually dictates the extent to which each is used.

Flow of communication refers to the direction of communication in a program. The two major options for communication are vertical (from top to bottom or from bottom to top) and horizontal (teacher to teacher or student to student).

To illustrate the importance of communication for the successful implementation of a curriculum, imagine an intensive FL program in which teachers and administrators primarily use an Oral mode for communication. In this program, teachers are told their teaching assignments, and given their teaching schedules during staff meetings. Teachers are expected to communicate with each other in a horizontal direction to keep informed. With this kind of communication process, there is the ever-present

possibility for incorrect information being spread. Obviously, this system is inadequate for large programs, and it can be a serious weakness even in small ones.

Another example is a FL program that distributes paper messages to all program participants. Not only is the distribution of paper expensive and contrary to conservation practices, the amount of paper can be so overwhelming that participants do not take note of high-priority messages.

Curriculum planners need to be aware of the options for communication within a program in order to design the most effective process of communication among its members.

2. The monitoring process entails a continual and systematic review of course implementation to determine how well the modification of curriculum goals meets the needs and expectations of the learners. Curriculum planners who wish to provide a learner-centered curriculum will devise processes for systematically revising the curriculum through regular monitoring and evaluation. This process might include frequent surveys of student and staff opinions, analysis of test scores, and review of instructional materials.

3. The decision-making process refers to how decisions are made, who is involved in making them, and who implements them. In many FL programs, decision-making is equated with the administrative staff. While it is their task, it should not be done without input from the various participants in the curriculum. The more input that decision-makers have from teachers, students, secretarial support, parents/fee payers, and personnel in related programs, the more effective the decisions will be.

Program units within the organization: In most FL curricula, and especially in intensive programs, there are several skill-based units. For example, intensive FL programs may have reading, writing, or listening programs. Some may have culture and study-skills programs and special-purposes programs, designed to teach the vocabulary and grammatical structures associated with a specific vocational area.

The way these programs interact is of great importance to the effective achievement of curriculum goals. If priority is to be given to one or more programs, decisions should be based on the overall goals of the program, and not be the result of aggressive or weak leadership styles of the responsible administrators. Duplication can be avoided if the programs are planned in accordance with the overall curriculum goals and objectives.

Communication among the different program units is another requirement for the success of a curriculum. Open communication among teachers and administrators

involved in the different programs can help a FL curriculum achieve integrative goals. Open communication, encouraged by regularly scheduled meetings or discussions, workshops, and class visitations, can also instill feelings of cooperation rather than rivalry among teachers, administrators, and even students.

Systematically Planning an Effective Organizational Dimension

In order to assess the organization of an existing curriculum or plan for the effective operation of a new one, curriculum planners need to follow a systematic process. This article has identified and discussed the major considerations: the resources, processes, and programs within the curriculum. A systematic process for assessing and planning effective operations would include a thorough review and analysis of these major features.

A suggested model for assessing and/or planning effective foreign-language curriculum organization includes the following steps:

1. Review the curriculum goals and objectives.
2. Determine how to collect data in each area below:
 - a. resources
 - b. processes
 - c. programs
3. Collect and analyze the data.
4. Determine the procedures needing modification.
5. Develop a system for frequent monitoring of the organizational concerns for the continual improvement of the curriculum. In order to follow the suggested model, curriculum planners should encourage participation from a number of teachers, administrators, and other support staff.

In the next step, the curriculum planning team should determine what kinds of data should be collected and how they should be gathered. Options for data collection include such direct methods as interviewing, observing, and holding discussions; indirect methods may call for reviewing and analyzing documents, observing the communication processes, and analyzing the goals and objectives of various skill-based programs within the overall program. The data collection activities should cover resources, processes, and programs.

Once the data are analyzed and interpreted, plans for effective and efficient organization should be designed and implemented. The final step of the model is the development of a system for frequent and systematic monitoring of the various organizational concerns.

Conclusion

Effective organization is important for the design and development of an FL curriculum. As can be seen from the examples provided in this article, systematic organization underlies the successful implementation of a curriculum. If FL curriculum planners develop unity of purpose among all participants, they can capitalize on all available capabilities to allow participants to pursue personal goals while contributing even more to the program.

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Bibliography

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